

# Sledding Soldiers

Story and Photos by MSG Bob Haskell



Poised for the November 1999 start of the World Cup bobsled competition in Norway are (from left) SPC Doug Sharp, SPC Mike Kohn, PV2 Steve Holcomb and Todd Hays.

*The Army's World Class Athlete Program is helping soldier-bobsleders take a shot at the 2002 Winter Olympics.*

**T**HE Olympic Games. Garrett Hines has been there, done that, and wants to do it again. His team mates — Steve Holcomb, Mike Kohn and Doug Sharp — are training hard to earn their own shots at what they consider “the world’s ultimate show.”

Bobsledding, they believe, is their ticket to the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City, Utah. The U.S. Army’s World Class Athlete Program is helping them follow that dream.

The soldiers are pushers and brakemen on the 13-man USA team that spent this winter racing sleek, 12 1/2-foot sleds down high-cornered, ice-covered tracks on the World Bobsleigh Tour. The first stop was Lillehammer, Norway, where the Americans competed against teams from 17 other countries.

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They satisfy their need for speed by giving the sleds a running start and jumping aboard for hair-raising, 75-mph rides that last 52 or 53 seconds down tracks such as the Lillehammer run — which was 1,248 yards long, had 16 corners and a dizzying drop of 104 yards.

This winter’s eight-meet season took the WCAP soldiers and their teammates to Germany, Austria, Italy, France and Switzerland, and will end this month with the world championships in Altenberg, Germany.

“I’ve been put into a situation where I can get into the greatest spectacle on earth and represent my country, and perhaps win a gold medal,” said Kohn as he prepared for his second World Cup season.

“I have the freedom to choose what I want to do. The least I can do is defend my country and that lifestyle,” he added. “I couldn’t

live any other way.”

The soldiers are a cross section of the total force advocated by Army Chief of Staff GEN Eric Shinseki:

- Hines, 30, from Atlanta, Ga., is a second lieutenant in the Army Reserve. He was named the 1998 Armed Forces Athlete of the Year after his team, led by four-time Olympian Brian Shimer, finished fifth in the four-man bobsled at the Nagano Games in Japan.

- Holcomb, 19, is the U.S. team’s youngest member and a private in the Utah Army National Guard. He has been ranked third in the nation in Super-G skiing and wants to bobsled for the USA on the Olympic course built in his hometown, Park City.

- Kohn, 27, from Chantilly, Va., is a specialist in the Virginia Army Guard. He holds a degree in exercise physiology from George Mason University. In 1992, he became the youngest bobsledder to compete in the U.S. Olympic Trials.

- Sharp, 30, from Jeffersonville, Ind., is a specialist in the active Army and a licensed chiropractor. He is former pole-vaulter and was an assistant track coach at the University of Louisville.

Holcomb, Kohn and Sharp signed up during the spring of 1999 to join the World Class Athlete Program and have returned to the World Cup bobsled circuit for a second season. They are assigned, along with Hines, to the National Guard Sports Regional Training Center in Colchester, Vt.

The mission of the Army’s World Class Athlete Program is to “support and guide nationally-



ranked soldier-athletes to compete and succeed in international competitions, including the Olympic Games, while maintaining military careers and promoting the U.S. Army to the world."

"Our job is to be ambassadors of good will," said Sharp. "It is the highest level you can aspire to. We belong to the ultimate team, because we represent our entire country."

Taking on the world's elite bobsled teams comes with a price, including being away from home for much of the recent holiday season.

The pushers are also the pit crews for the drivers who steer the two-man and four-man sleds into and out of high-banked curves.

They lug the heavy sleds on and off trucks, change the runners and polish the steel until it is as smooth as new glass.

They run countless short dashes and lift weights, because pushing bobsleds requires them to be among the world's strongest sprinters.

They wait for hours in the cold for their two chances to race each day, and they take the pain from their teammates' spikes digging into the backs of their

legs while they bend low in their sleds.

They have to start the sleds and jump aboard with clock-like precision, because good starts can improve a sled's time by the hundreds of a second that define World Cup winners and losers.

"I look for pushers with speed and power and the character to work as a team," said driver Todd Hays, who also raced during the 1998 Winter Games. Holcomb, Kohn and Sharp are his pushers for this season.

Those qualities of character and sacrifice also make them strong as soldiers, said Hines, who is on Sharp's crew.

All four said that being part of the WCAP is the best way to serve their country at this point in their lives.

"The only way I could compete at this level is to do it full-time for the National Guard," said Holcomb. He has postponed college to compete against European stars who are as famous in their countries as baseball players are in the United States.

"The biggest thing is going to the Olympics — it's the biggest show on earth," he said. "Right now there's no greater thrill than representing your country in this race." □



**Army Reserve 2LT Garrett Hines (left) joins Kohn, Holcomb and Sharp on this winter's USA World Cup bobsled team.**

## Calling on World Class Athletes

**E**IGHT to 10 years. That's how long it takes to develop athletes for Olympic competition, said LTC Willie Davenport, a five-time Olympian who won the gold medal in the 110-meter hurdles at Mexico City in 1968.

Davenport concluded his Olympic career as a bobsledder during the 1980 Winter Games at Lake Placid, N.Y., and he has since been an advocate for a U.S. Army program intended to level the international playing field. It's the World Class Athlete Program, at Fort Carson, Colo., and at the National Guard Regional Training Center in Colchester, Vt.

Eighty-one active Army and reserve-component soldiers are currently training and competing full-time in summer and winter events ranging from boxing to bobsledding.

"First you have to have the will to win. Then you have to have the opportunity to train," said Davenport, who works in the National Guard Bureau's Competitive Sports Office in Arlington, Va. "We are opening the doors for future Olympians. Then we give them the chance to do well."

The WCAP has produced its share of Olympic standouts during the past 15 years.

Fourteen soldiers have won medals during summer Olympics games. Six have won gold medals in wrestling, shooting and boxing. Fifteen qualified for the 1996 Atlanta Summer Games.

Eight soldiers competed in the 1998 Winter Games in Nagano, Japan. Three were bobsledders who helped give a U.S. four-man team a fifth-place finish, this country's best showing in 42 years.

Other accomplishments include one gold, two silver and two bronze medals during the 1998 National Boxing Championships and silver and bronze boxing medals at the 1998 Goodwill Games.

Another 35 members of the Air Force and four members of the Navy and Marines train in world-class programs sponsored by those services.

The military training programs are vital, said Davenport, because many Olympic athletes in other countries train full-time as members of their nations' armed forces.

Those who aspire to be world-class competitors while serving their country can check out the Army's WCAP in these ways:

- Active-Army soldiers can contact their installation's sports director.

- National Guard soldiers can contact the National Guard Sports Regional Training Center, Camp Johnson, Colchester, Vt., 05446-3004 or call (802) 338-3316.

- Army Reserve soldiers can contact the U.S. Army World Class Athlete Program, Building 1662, Fort Carson, Colo., 80913, or call (719) 526-3908.

— MSG Bob Haskell